

FACT SHEET: Wildlife Rehabilitation starts with people

The arrival of oil along the Gulf Coast from the Deepwater Horizon disaster has brought images of oiled wildlife in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. Photos and video of pelicans completely drenched in light crude are deeply disturbing to see and have produced an outcry of concern and frustration from the public. From the beginning of the incident, plans have been developed and advanced to respond to the need for rehabilitating wildlife impacted by this disaster.

Starting with trained wildlife handlers

When a person sees an oiled or injured animal, the natural tendency is to jump in and help. However, the rescue and rehabilitation of oiled birds must be performed by trained wildlife professionals and volunteers. Without proper training, would-be rescuers with the best of intentions can inadvertently harm or further stress oiled wildlife or even harm themselves, either by struggling animals or the oil itself. Qualified rescuers must go through intensive training on the handling of hazardous material as well as proper wildlife capture techniques.

“Properly trained responders for oiled wildlife are an essential element in providing an animal with the best chance at successful release back to the wild”, said Resee Collins, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Paraprofessional Coordinator, and a wildlife raptor rehabilitator with more than 20 years experience.

Due to the increased number of trained people evaluating the spill impacted areas, it is also likely that we will recover more naturally injured or dead fish and wildlife than normal.

Collection and initial analysis

Statistics from the fish and wildlife collection report are published daily by the Deepwater Horizon Unified Command include numbers of: visibly oiled birds, how many that are collected alive, how many that are collected dead and the number of releases to the wild.

These are the consolidated numbers of collected fish and wildlife that have been reported to the Unified Area Command from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), incident area commands, rehabilitation centers and other authorized sources operating within the Deepwater Horizon/BP incident impact area.

At this phase in the response, field-level staff will document all injured or dead fish and wildlife encountered in the impact area. This document reflects only the initial, field-level, evaluation and does not reflect a final determination of the cause of injury, or death. Not all of the injured or dead fish and wildlife reflected in these numbers were necessarily caused by the Deepwater Horizon/BP incident. Official designations of cause of death will be determined at a later date.

Part of the long-term assessment process is to carefully examine and determine the cause of death or injury for impacted fish and wildlife. Some fish and wildlife reported here have likely died or been injured by natural causes, not due to the oil spill.

Critical steps to rehabilitation

Once found or captured, collected fish and wildlife are given an identifying number that will follow it throughout the evaluation process. Collected fish and wildlife are given an initial examination to search for broken bones, external oil or other injuries. As needed, this may be followed by a more thorough examination to search for less obvious injuries, such as oil in the mouth, throat or eyes. An additional step may include a partial or full necropsy (an autopsy for animals) to help determine the exact cause of death if possible.

In the best of circumstances, wildlife rehabilitation is difficult. It involves more than simply catching, washing and releasing wildlife contaminated with oil. Experienced oiled wildlife rehabilitators ensure that oiled wildlife receive the life-saving medical care and nutritional support that a debilitated animal requires to have a second chance at life in the wild.

Some incoming birds can be desperately ill requiring prolonged care in captivity, while others may rapidly stabilize and need only minimal care. Each animal needs to be individually assessed and then treated appropriately including making the difficult decision that some creatures can't be saved.

Helping wildlife

To report oiled wildlife, please call 1-866-557-1401. Callers are asked to provide as many details as possible about the exact location of the animal.

All reports are investigated and addressed as necessary by the dispatch of wildlife rescue teams operating throughout the incident impact area.

Individuals with bird rescue and rehabilitation skills and experience can find the paraprofessional announcement posted at www.nwrawildlife.org or can send an email listing their wildlife experience and contact information to fw4ppc@fws.gov to be registered as a paraprofessional.